

Penn State

There must be some way out of here I thought to myself as downtown Philadelphia was completely gridlocked and every road heading West was a parking lot. "Big trouble on Philly highways," said the guy on the traffic report. For some reason on a preposterously warm November Saturday afternoon, a bunch of different people in various key locations decided to crash into each other. 10 minutes later the traffic guy said, "What is going on today?" And I tried all the roads and every shortcut and no matter where I went I ended up sitting taking almost an hour to drive what should take 20 minutes. Finally I made it to the meeting place in Valley Forge and picked up my friends the double-D couple who had come from even farther from somewhere in the middle of New Jersey. We hopped on the Pennsylvania Turnpike which prides itself on being the oldest such road in the nation. About the only thing that's changed since it was built sometime in the beginning of this century is the price of the tolls and occasionally the speed limit. This year in the annual trucker's poll Pennsylvania came in third for worst roads in the country only because Arkansas and Louisiana roads have apparently deteriorated over the past year. The turnpike was miraculously free of traffic and for the most part state troopers and my car was in the mood to go a good 15 miles above the speed limit. Stopping at the last rest area we exited the car where we were playing my more or less "Dylan Country" tape which is Self Portrait and Dylan along with other stuff thrown in in a different order to notice the temperature had dropped a good ten degrees. Then off the turnpike for a short hop on I-83 to the gravel, up-hill wonders of US 322 West, a mostly two-lane road made out of some sort of gravel material so every 10 feet the wheels go bumpety bump. By this time Dylan-in-Nashville had been replaced by live Otis Redding and I was never able to get the bumps to synchronize rhythmically with the music. 75 miles of this. But it was a nice day and we were in good spirits. Soon we were met by the hundred mile Winnebago caravan coming from the Penn State football game. "Serious tailgating," said Mr. D.

And then the caravan ended, but as we got closer there were Winnebagos everywhere in fields in ditches, thousands of them and finally there we were in line for the lot with plenty of time to scope out a space for the all-important quick exit. We chose the Winnebago lot. We got out of the car to find the temperature had dropped again, about 20 degrees, maybe more. It was freezing. Time to pull out the hooded sweatshirts. "The hood is up, don't talk to me," said Mr. D. In the distance loomed the Bryce Jordan Center like some great Spielbergian spaceship landed in a cornfield in the Pennsylvania blue mountains.

"Never seen no place like this before," I said quoting a rambling gambling evangelistical song traveler, who said the same thing when centuries ago he played a similar edifice also located next to a giant football stadium located in the middle of what everyone knows is the Mafia burial ground of the state where anything is legal as long as you don't get caught. Hoods up and not talking we were more or less blown towards the spaceship box office as some wicked Canadian wind appeared to make things even colder. Obtaining the tickets with lots of time we headed for the congregation in the parking lot to secretly partake of the sacred plant. "Are we there yet?" someone might have said. "If you have to ask, you're there," came an answer. We stood up and all of a sudden we were back in 1968. Someone had gathered all the Volkswagen busses that had been in hiding for the past two decades and plop them all

down together in the Bryce Jordan Center. Bongos were bonging and drums were drumming and all sorts of items grey flannel dwarfs would prefer to see banished were in display in decorated cases like treasures from pyramids embedded in ice. There were people everywhere. Music in all directions. Lots of hair. Dreadlocks, too-long floppy floppy jeans, a circus-meeting of the tribes. There must be some way out of here I found myself thinking for the second time that day, as from out of nowhere some authority loudspeaker boomed, "keep the passageways clear."

It wasn't getting any warmer, so we headed for the great looming spaceship arena, check out the souvenir stand, hamburgers for only 3 bucks and into our seats. The floor is maybe almost half full, the soundboards enclosed by a fence. Warren Haynes comes out to check his gear to huge applause. Finally the lights come down and the band comes out, "Viola Lee Blues," and Derek Trucks is immediately noticeable on guitar and Haynes echoing him and off into some more or less blues-based jam and it's really okay and somewhere in the middle they find "My Favorite Things" and leave that and come back again and Phil is right there digging in and I suddenly realize I'm really hungry and go out to wander up and down the lonesome town of the spaceship perimeter 'cause I can't see a thing anyway because the people in the next section are standing up especially this 7 foot tall guy who's not even paying attention to the show and I don't understand why when there's a whole half a dance floor not being used these people have chosen to get seats. Something just doesn't add up here.

Out in the perimeter it's gotten very strange. Barefoot guys in skirts are dancing. I get a burger and a no-coke pepsi and wander around. Every ten feet there's someone with their eyes closed moving around in some sort of trance-like circle. It seems the same people are passing me over and over again and I can't figure out how they got around the entire spaceship so fast. Security guards are chasing some girl who is totally ignoring them wandering right back into the seats after they just got her out. I suddenly realize I'm back where I started and go back to my seat. "He just sat down 10 seconds ago," Mr. D. says and wow, I can actually see the whole stage where the band will soon be arriving at Terrapin Station and back into Viola Lee Blues and Mr. D. says, "It's called a sandwich."

And they actually stop playing and start "Box of Rain," and Phil can't exactly find the melody but he means it so it doesn't really matter and they leave and come back and do something else or maybe they did something else before, but now the lights are up though they're still on stage. And soon they are rolling away the equipment and rolling the Bob equipment on.

And soon they take the stage and there he is looking damn fine in his best riverboat gambler clothes with a Lester Flatt or Colonel Sanders tie depending on whether you're coming from a bluegrass or chicken perspective and they're into "I Am The Man Thomas," and it's a fine upbeat bluegrass/gospel thing and Larry especially sounds a little stronger on it than Bob does and the lights go down and they're taking their time before going into the Mexican cantina rendition of "To Ramona" that's almost a little too cantina-ish but still okay and the nights go down and apparently another huddle and before the song starts I hear Bob play this tiny 3-note blues lick that could mean "It's Alright Ma," but they decide to do something else and the rhythm starts and it could be

"Desolation Row" or it could be "Visions of Johanna" and Dylan or someone is pushing the rhythm and he's alternately singing it great and okay searching for that indefinable place where he can really drive it home and sometimes finding it, singing maybe half the verses and I wonder if he picks and chooses from different verses each time he does it, but I'm not that much of a statistician. They're right into "Mama You Been On My Mind," with Larry picking out crystal clear like water running Doc Watson-ish leads until Bob takes over after the 2nd verse and he kind of seems more into playing it than he is in singing it and another verse and he goes back and picks up a harmonica and actually looks at it to make sure it's the right one and goes into a really great but two short solo where instead of playing the usual two note thing he's been doing lately to start (like check out the harp on "Trying To Get To Heaven" on TOOM for an example), he's playing some really crazy up and down stuff, but it's over too fast and he gave just enough to let you know he can still do it. Then into Tangled and again he's searching for that thing singing one verse or maybe even a line high and the next one low and on the "She lit a burner on the stove" verse he hits it and it's that moment where he just nails the song right through you in the that way that only he can do and the show is going by really fast and it's into Watchtower with Larry on lapsteel and it's okay but nothing really special and another lights-down huddle and the intro to Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues appears and this one of those songs that he really cares about and sings every verse except "up on housing project hill," getting in his best electric solo of the night. And then Shelter with yet another arrangement, kind of moderately paced which leads to a burning "Real You At Last," with great nasty guitar from Sexton followed by the night's show-stopper, "Tears of Rage," carefully done with beautiful back-up vocals from Larry and Charlie with Larry reaching way back summoning the spirit of those Basement recordings and especially Richard Manuel.

And then after another huddle, and a fairly crazy intro, they bounced into a rolling roller coaster of "Leopard-Skin Pill-Box Hat." And at the end, Bob lingered on-stage after the rest of the band had split and turned around to deliver a classic Bob Dylan-styled bow.

They returned to launch into "Love Sick" notable for "take to the road and plunder" being changed to "Feel like I'm being plowed under," and into an okay "Rolling Stone," and then "Blowin' In The Wind," and we looked at each other and with 200 miles for me to drive and another 75 or so for my companions made a quick exit into the even chillier Pennsylvania mountains night for the steep downhill drive discussing whether Charlie's being under-utilized or not as we cruised by the run-away truck ramps.

Baltimore

Baltimore's a nice town and I'm starting to like it. You can park for free not far from the venue if you try and at the venue itself the ticket-takers are friendly telling you to enjoy the show, leading you right to your seat and even letting you go outside for a cigarette without any hassle whatsoever. I was amazed.

But not as amazed as I was when Larry Campbell started playing the intro to "Ring Them Bells" on his pedal steel. My mind was saying could it really be, and as the band picked up the tune I knew it couldn't be anything else. The

other songs, even "Visions of Johanna" seemed like just warm-ups in comparison. (And like some other people here so I've heard for I have yet to check out RMD today, the thought crossed my mind that Dylan or someone very close to him is reading this group.) Dylan sang it carefully, clearly and caringly, totally into it, totally shining that special Dylan light that just cuts right through you and into you, into your heart, your body, your soul.

But little did I know that was just the beginning of a rocking, reeling, rolling ride that in surprise factor alone would equal perhaps any Bob Dylan show I've seen.

And in Baltimore Bob Dylan was full of surprises, one after the other like the master magician he truly is. The next surprise came right after "Tangled Up In Blue," when the band started this very funky bluesy riff that sounded awfully familiar. And I'm saying to myself, what is this, but I'm thinking Bob Dylan songs, not all songs, and given Dylan's penchant for playing with his material it could've turned into any number of his blues based songs and so when he sang is just about as strong a voice I've seen at any '90s show, "I taught the weeping willow how to cry cry cry," and it turned into "Big River," probably my favorite Johnny Cash song of all time that I even play myself, my mind was echoing one huge blasting Holy Shit!

And then the band played the intro--though sounding new and different probably because of Larry's input--to "Joey" which at times was a little hard to concentrate on due the couple who was doing some kind of waltz on the walkway in front of me, that was not a typical Dead dance. I contemplated leaning over and saying, "Are you aware you're waltzing to a song about a mobester getting his head blown off in a clam bar, but didn't.

Again the band was into a familiar blues riff I couldn't quite place and again Dylan blew my mind when he started singing "Down Along The Cove," and Lord Have Mercy Mama what a version it was with killer solos all along the song.

And then from out of nowhere "Man In The Long Black Coat" appeared, spooky as can be, marching to the crickets chirping in the shadows that may not really be all that far from the cove.

And then yet another nasty blues riff and wham you're transported to a whole other place a whole other time of bald wigs and reincarnated horses sounding a warning all mixed up in some insane historical funhouse mirror with Charle Sexton scorching and searching, summoning the original Mike Bloomfield licks.

And what song could Dylan possibly do after that but "Like A Rolling Stone?" Was there anything left to say?

So at last he brought out Phil Lesh and unified this crazy anything can happen tour that's sadly been laden with rumors.

In one monumental, too-quick set that went by like some roller coaster dream, he touched on every decade of his career, almost all of his greatest albums and left me both happy and amazed.

Philadelphia

Bob Dylan kind of has a history of playing a lot of standards when he comes to Philadelphia, especially at the bigger venues. Back in '97 when he was pulling out the likes of "Blind Willie McTell," "Wheels on Fire," and the occasional "One of Us Must Know" and "Seven Days" in other parts of the country Philly got "Maggie's Farm" and "Thin Man" and so it was tonight, but don't let that part of the setlist fool you.

For his only show actually in Philly in the year of '99 Dylan made sure to bring his ever-changing tour with him.

The show was completely different in mood, texture and feel than the previous night's show 90 miles to the South in Baltimore. And if some of the setlist seemed to recall the days when "Maggie's Farm" and "Thin Man" were regular parts of the setlist, the performance tonight was nothing short of excellent and its own way once again full of surprises.

Instead of opening the acoustic set with "I Am The Man, Thomas," he pulled out "Hallelujah I'm Ready" which worked just as well.

Then he pulls out the song I was hoping to hear in Baltimore, "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll" and it was brilliantly intense from the start. In fact the whole acoustic set was perfect! It seemed kind of lowkey, but there was a quiet unified force in the band tonight and each song had a subtle burning power. At Carroll's conclusion, he reached two songs back from the same album, his 3rd, *Times They Are A-Changin'*, the album that totally sold me on Dylan a few centuries ago for a masterful "Boots of Spanish Leather."

And then came one of the best surprises of the night, "A Satisfied Mind," the old Porter Wagoner country hit that serves as the intro to *Saved*. And tonight Bob did it the way it's usually done, country style with fantastic harmonies from Larry and Charlie in one truly glorious rendition. (And for those who pay attention to such things, it should be noted that Ian & Sylvia also covered this song on their album *Play One More*, the same album that includes a song Dylan has tried on a few occasions, "The French Girl.")

An equally superb "Mama You Been On My Mind" came next followed by "Tangled Up In Blue."

Now I realize a lot of people are tired of seeing this song in the setlist and sometimes I get tired of it myself. But there's one thing about this song, other than being an incredible song (and one which I know from personal experience is a lot fun to play), Dylan never sings this song the same way. I just saw three shows in a row and every night he found a new angle, a new mood, something else to search for.

Dylan was obviously in good spirits (and looking great too--for the first time this tour I had seats that were as close to the stage as you could get) and at some point during the acoustic set he said, (referring to Temple University), "I always wanted to play here. My buddy, Bill Cosby went to school here. We used to

play the clubs." Or something like that, the last sentence sounded mumbled from where I was sitting.

Big surprise number 2 came with the opening song of the electric segment, another Johnny Cash classic, "Folsom Prison Blues," again excellently done with Charlie playing the famous Luther Perkins guitar lead. And of course this begs the question, is Dylan going to pull out a different Johnny Cash tune in this part of the show every night for the rest of the remaining shows, and if he does, that will be something.

The lights went down and somebody (I'm pretty sure it was Bob) played the opening lick to "Thin Man" while the huddle was going on--since the lights were down you couldn't see, and then there was a pause and sure enough it was "Thin Man," and though this was a song I was really tired of seeing a year or so ago, tonight it was just fine and the perfect lead in to surprise number 3, "Man of Peace." And a lowdown rocking version it was too, followed by "I'll Be Your Baby Tonight," featuring an extended gorgeous pedal steel solo from Larry, followed by a simply stunning "Shooting Star."

And while another past staple, "Maggie's Farm" closed the set, it had a funky rhythmic groove that could not be denied.

"Love Sick" as usual was the first encore and "Don't Think Twice" as many times as I've heard it, it was exquisite with Larry's finger-picking setting the tone, followed by a typically fun but powerhouse version of "Not Fade Away." Dylan bowed, the band left the stage the lights went down.

And then they came back! "Blowin' In The Wind." And while some people may complain about this song, the song that initially made Dylan famous, there's something about those harmonies on "Wiiiiinnnnnnnnnnnnnnndddddd" that hit me every time and tonight they were as moving and powerful as any of this arrangement I've witnessed.

But neither the audience nor Dylan was going anywhere and the band kicked into what might be the most spectacularly rocking version of "Highway 61 Revisited" ever done anywhere. It didn't just kick ass. It FUCKING KICKED ASS. And it seemed to go on forever and everyone in the band was into it and obviously having one hell of a time. On the last verse Dylan really stretched it out into "down on highway sixteeeeeeeeeee one" in one blazingly nasty voice, then Charlie Sexton tore into this supersonic but totally funky guitar solo that was just beyond any beyond any of the usual words used to describe guitar solos and then Larry answered him with a solo that was equally awesome and then back to Charlie and back to Larry and Bob might've gotten in a few licks there too, but mostly he seemed more than happy to play rhythm and Tony is jumping up on the drum riser and driving the rhythm with Kemper and Dylan's bopping around just digging it and looking as pleased as I've ever seen him look if you can imagine Bob Dylan looking pleased and it just kept going on and on, higher and higher and then it was over.

And once again a setlist on paper is not the show. And if the Philly show was not as wildly adventurous as the previous four or five shows (especially Baltimore) the musicianship was evident throughout and this band was as

tight, perhaps the most tight I've ever seen them. They were in the pocket from the first note to the last.

Meadowlands

On October 17, 1981, Bob Dylan played his first concert at what was then known as the Brendan Byrne Arena which was close to brand new at the time which the out-going governor of New Jersey in an act that appalled and nauseated just about everybody named after himself. No one called it the Byrne Arena and now at the end of the 20th Century where everything is named after a corporation, it is the Continental Airlines Arena (I believe its second corporate name) which is only slightly better than the Pepsi Arena or the National Car Rental Center which doesn't even sound like an arena but a parking lot. I am convinced that in the next century we will soon see cities and third world countries taking on corporate monikers as well and soon the only way anyone will know where they are is by what zip-code or area code which will probably be corporate as well. Either way, that particular arena will always be the Meadowlands to me.

The huge Meadowlands sports complex is built on a murky swampy bit of Jersey desolation, a sort of non-place rising out of nothing a bit North of the Mordor flames beneath the Pulaski skyway between Newark and Jersey City and between the more or less upscale North Jersey suburbs on the road that leads to the Lincoln Tunnel. The whole area has long been rumored to be a Mafia burial ground and some people insist that Jimmy Hoffa is part of the Meadowland's foundation.

Bob Dylan's 1981 concert at the Meadowlands was a monumental occasion, and I still consider it and probably always will in the top five Bob Dylan concerts I've seen. A 28-song show that found him fully resurrecting his older songs after two years of doing exclusively "gospel" material. He had one of his greatest and most professional bands featuring the stellar rhythm team of Tim Drummond and Jim Keltner and for the fall leg of the tour, none other than Al Kooper himself on keyboards who was only too happy to revisit his original organ parts on "Like A Rolling Stone" and "I Want You."

Dylan was animated and in great humor that October night. Starting to introduce the band he said, "I wanna say hello to Mr. & Mrs. Kooper out there tonight. This is uh, their son."

Kooper who was I believe wearing a football or hockey helmet acknowledged the applause. Dylan, wearing his famous Wayfarer shades the entire show had lots more to say: "I've never seen no place like this before," as 20,000 people cracked up. "I went into the dressing room and my mirror was black."

"There's a lot of famous people here tonight. I just want you to know that you may be sitting next to somebody (in his most classic Dylan inflection) famous."

"There's a lot of people from Rolling Stone here tonight. After the show, they're gonna come backstage and interview me, then I'm gonna interview *them.* And before "Gambling Man," which the trio of back-up singers sang, "Isn't there a gambling town around here somewhere? What's the name of that place? Atlantic City?"

But of course it was the music that night that was the most important. Dylan was into singing real high on that tour (the previous June he was into singing real low). Sitting in the farthest corner of the highest balcony, literally a dot on a stage that seemed a mile away he'd cut right through you with an achingly beautiful "Girl From The North Country," and putting such intensity into the bridge on "I Want You" that every nerve in your body reacted. A slowed-down, spooky solid-rock that could stir Blind Willie Johnson in his grave and a solo till the last verse when the bass and drums kicked in "Times They Are A-Changin'" that instead of being its original call to arms seemed to summon up everything that had happened in the almost two decades since he wrote it--the war, the assassinations, the hopes and dreams lost, capped by a harmonica solo as eerie and lonesome as he's ever played.

And so I couldn't help but think of that concert long ago as Seth Kulick and I hiked across the parking lot next to Giant Stadium going to what must be around our 30th show together at least. We were sitting in different places but not far apart. Seth with his brother and I was with longtime RMD contributor Arnie and his wife whom we just visited. Arnie's been listening to Bob just about as long as I have and he grew up in New York and I grew up outside of New York, and through e-mail we've discovered a shared history of listening not only to Dylan, but listening to same late-night radio shows and the same concerts and being in the same room at the same time and here we were after all this time attending a Dylan show together and I kind of felt like I'd known him all my life.

And again we were sitting in the back of the hall directly opposite the stage though not in the highest balcony pretty much surrounded by morons who talked through Phil Lesh and who talked through Dylan and I couldn't figure out why they spent the thirty bucks plus for tickets not to mention another ten to park to go to a show they evidently had no interest in whatsoever since they weren't listening and were barely watching and were talking about everything but the music. I just don't get it, considering there were probably plenty of people who would have done anything to get a ticket to this show.

Bob Dylan's second appearance at the Meadowlands seemed to be a summation of this tour where he has pretty much consistently surprised and delighted his fans by pulling out all kinds of songs, not just once a night but several. It could be called the "Anything Can Happen" tour or more accurately the "Holy Shit!" tour because judging by the net that seems to be most people's reactions upon seeing the setlists. And so at this show at a place that is fairly centrally located on the East Coast that say people in Washington or in Philly or in New England would not think twice about going to, not to mention all the people in Jersey and New York, at the largest venue on the tour, he really did seem to have his fans in mind. And once again I wondered as have others during this tour particularly is someone keeping an eye on what's going on on RMD? Because, at this concert he seemed to be saying, you heard about "Hootchie Coochie Man?" here it is. You heard about "Song to Woody" and "Ring Them Bells?" Here it is. Of course I could be completely wrong about this and no one will ever know.

There is a difference to the acoustic set on this tour. Nothing is being casually thrown out there. Yes, he may forget lines--but I still prefer him messing up to

using a teleprompter--he way skip verses (which he's been doing for years), but he seems to be treating these songs as something to be cherished. The performances are understated and almost delicate. There is thought behind the singing and the arrangements and not just on Dylan's part, but on the part of his excellent musicians, even on the songs where all three guitarists are doing little more than strumming. "Song To Woody" was so quietly and subtly performed that at first I felt this place is way too big for this to be appreciated. And I had to doubly concentrate having to block out the talkers around me.

There was a force and fire to "It's Alright Ma," which started out with just guitars, then the bass then the drums in the best ensemble arrangement I've seen of this song with the borrowed from "Wake Up Little Susie" riff of course being emphasized, but not in the totally overblown way it was in '78. I saw the very first live performance of this song in 1964 and it is one that I always want to hear, one that has great personal meaning for me and one that I consider one of Bob Dylan's all-time greatest works. His own "Howl" set to music. He flubbed the lyrics (and laughed) at that first performance in New York City what seems both like centuries ago and yesterday, and he flubbed them last night and I didn't care then and I didn't care last night. Last night's version, the version he did at Meadowlands in '81 and that very first version were all great and all for different reasons.

And the version last night was not the speedy let me get this over with as fast as possible version that I've seen at other shows.

And then the slow steel majestic intro to "Ring Them Bells," started and I was happy, not only to hear it again, but happy that my friends Arnie and Seth and Dylan and Daniela could hear what I heard in Baltimore. "I'm in heaven," Arnie said to me as it ended. And so into "Tangled," but then another surprise, another acoustic song, "Visions of Johanna," which worked much better than it did in the number three slot in Baltimore, where perhaps Dylan wasn't quite warmed up enough to sing it quite the way he wanted to.

And then "Hootchie Cootchie Man," written by Willie Dixon, but as every Chicago blues fan knows, Muddy Waters' signature song. And the band was tough with Charlie Sexton obviously into it and lovingly showing that he's undoubtedly spent countless hours listening to and mastering the sound of who knows how many great Chicago blues guitarists and Dylan did Muddy proud, singing it straight, singing it true, lining out those images that stretch from the Delta all the way up Highway 61 to Chicago, that poetry of the blues, as musicologist Sam Charters once called it. The only thing that might've taken it higher was if Dylan had played the harp, and while the last thing I would every try to do is guess what goes on in Bob Dylan's mind, maybe he just felt (he is a musician after all) that he could never do Little Walter justice (even though he came fairly close to getting the Little Walter sound in a few fleeting moments at the end of "Are You Ready.")

And then even deeper into the blues, all the way down to Georgia for "Blind Willie McTell," one of his most remarkable songs. At once, a tribute to that remarkable blues singer, but at the same time a history of the South and a history of the world, all the way from New Orleans to Jerusalem indeed. And I thought of Seth a few sections away finally after two years of trying and

missing seeing this song at last and next to me Arnie just couldn't believe it was happening.

And then, even more blues. "Tombstone Blues," with Sexton again stepping out, raw mean and nasty, Dylan's own "Hootchie Cootchie Man" updated with John the Conqueror updated becoming a dreamlike John the Baptist talking to the Commander-in Chief, where the delta has been replaced by the old folks home and the college. And hearing it, I remembered way back when Highway 61 Revisited was still pretty new and Muddy and Wolf and Little Walter were also on the turntable, listening to that song in some long lost NYC apartment and a friend of mine saying in reference to the Chicago guys, that stuff is great, but this ("Tombstone Blues") that's our blues.

From there it was into a shortened version of "Joey" a New York City song if ever there was one. No, not one of his greatest though one of his most controversial. Maybe he had the rumors of who's supposed to be underneath the Meadowlands in mind. At one point he totally spaced on the lyrics. It didn't matter. And yet another blues capped the night, a joyous rocking "Leopard-Skin Pill Box Hat."

The encores were, well.... the encores. Phil Lesh came out for "Alabama Getaway," (time to hit the bathroom) followed by "Rainy Day Women," (I thought to myself two parking-lot songs in a row) and the last was the only song all night where the talkers finally shut up and yet they came back for "Blowin'" and "Not Fade Away." And the houselights went down and stayed down for a long time and we wondered whether he would actually come back, but it was almost midnight and he'd played for two hours.

And so, did this match that previous time at the Meadowlands 18 years ago? It doesn't matter. It's another time and in a way another place. Will this show stay in my mind for almost two decades the way that concert did? I have no idea. I do know this much: Bob Dylan was being very generous to his fans last night.

Copa Room First Show

Atlantic City to put it quite simply a bizarre place and here was Bob Dylan appearing there for the fourth time at a place he already played earlier this year, the Copa room in the Sands Casino. I left Philly in the middle or rush hour, miraculously didn't hit any traffic jams and made it to A.C. in the usual time: one hour flat. I strolled past the gamblers in the one arm bandits easily found the line to the Copa Room and wandered down it till I found my friends the Double-D couple just where they said they would be. Now the Copa room is pretty small with lots of tables and chairs and these booth-like lounge things which they keep reserved for the heavy gamblers who get comped to the show. They have some sort of seating chart and it takes awhile for everyone to get in. Sometimes it helps to tip the Maitre d' to get a better spot. We got a pretty good table a little to the left of the center of the stage and had a good 45 minutes to kill before show time. I spent it getting something to eat in the Casino (they give you passes out), and wandering the Copa Room in search of

various RMD-ers though I didn't know what they looked like, and found the one who did give me a description, Kevin Reilly who as it happened was sitting at the table next to mine.

So right around 8 PM the curtain came up and there were the roadies tuning the guitars. About 8 minutes after, Dylan and band appeared and launched into a spirited "Roving Gambler," a totally appropriate song for the setting. Dylan seemed very loose and in good spirits smiling broadly. An okay "Mr. Tambourine Man," followed and then Dylan said hello to someone in the audience whose name I already forget and said he was the president of the International Bob Dylan fan club, and then went into the Stanley Brother's "Cold Walls and Steel Bars" and it was good too. The thumping rhythm he uses these days for "Desolation Row" came next and it was he was singing strongly and clearly and this was followed by the now familiar, clean picking of Larry Campbell introducing "Mama You Been On My Mind." A powerful "It's Alright Ma" came next followed by a nice gentle "Tomorrow Is A Long Time." And about this time we started looking at each other. Six songs and not an electric guitar in sight. Could it be?

Now let's backtrack a bit. When Dylan played the Copa Room at the end of his tour last February and people found it was a small 700-seat room, speculation ran high. Would he make it special? Would it be another Supper Club? As it turned out those shows ended up being typical tour shows, though a little shorter and fairly lackluster ones at that. Was this the night he would make up for it?

"Masters of War" came next. And then they started something unfamiliar, something I couldn't place, something almost jazzy. And Dylan said something encouraging to the band like "you got it" or something like that and stepped to the mike and the words didn't come. And the band kept jamming with Larry on steel and Dylan stood there still in a good mood, but whatever song it was, the words didn't come and it sort of collapsed, and he said, "Well here's my version of it," and went into a delicate "One Too Many Mornings." This was followed by a fairly roaring "Tangled," and they took off their guitars and left the stage, returning for a quick "Blowin' In The Wind." There were no band introductions in this show.

Now at some point in the show, (I forget between which songs) a woman jumped on stage to talk to Bob, and then she motioned to some other guy who came up and then they left. I don't know what it is about this particular room that makes people think they can jump on stage.

Anyway, "Blowin'" didn't have its usual long introduction where the band runs through an entire verse and chorus before Dylan starts singing, just a tiny little intro and he was into it. At some point during this song Bob's guitar tech snuck on stage and grabbed Bob's Strat from behind the drums. The lights went down after "Blowin'," and there they were back on stage again but in the shadows you could see this time they had electric guitars, and wam! into "Not Fade Away," and then real deja vu time, as all of a sudden there's one, there's two, no there's 50 people on stage just like last February's late show at the Sands. And Dylan is surrounded and you can't see him. But unlike last time,

he didn't stay on stage and very quickly you saw a roadie take his guitar and lead him off stage and the song collapsed. End of show. Again.

Now who knows whether they would have done another song? But given the things that have been happening on this tour, especially in the last two weeks, it wasn't out of the question. While "Not Fade Away" has been the show closer for most of this year, in Philly he came back after it. So anything is possible, and given that this time around he was attempting to make the show something unique and special by doing the whole thing (except for NFA) acoustic anything was possible. But we'll never know.

Copa Room 2nd Show

It was out of show number one and back in line for show number two, this time with Kevin Reilly while my other friends went off in search of food and gambling having decided that getting in line was a waste of time. The line moved somewhat faster and we were joined by some other friends of mine. Once inside we had a choice of tables and chose one a little closer to the stage, but also because Kevin had shared his table with the two guys seated there and said they weren't talkers. So we had a table of no talkers which was something of a problem at the first show.

Just as the lights went down, a human wall in the next row in front of us decided to stand up. "SIT DOWN!" came the shout from not one but at least two tables. He ignored it. "SIT DOWN" came the collective shout again. (I loved it.) Finally on about the third or fourth shout he realized he had no choice.

Dylan and the band came out and were into "Oh Babe It Ain't No Lie." There was a force to it, and a tightness that wasn't there on the first show. What could have been the intro to either "Girl From the North Country" or "Boots of Spanish Leather" came next. I wrote down "North Country," then said to my friend, "No it's 'Boots.'" It was a beautifully played and sung "North Country," followed by a splendid "Visions of Johanna." Then came a nice surprise, "Rock of Ages," the hymn done more or less in a haunting bluegrass version that was truly beautiful.

Then what sounded like the typical Never Ending Tour intro to "Times They Are A-Changin'" followed, except it wasn't, it was "Hard Rain," and a truly excellent "Hard Rain" with Dylan getting more and more into it with each line digging in really deep on "the song of a poet who died in the gutter."

And then out came the electrics and into a blues riff and both Kevin and I wrote down "Tombstone Blues," but it was "Maggie's Farm." But playing around with intros weren't the only tricks Dylan had up his sleeve, the next song was a total surprise, "The Man In Me." And it was just a gorgeous version, particularly the bridge which he did twice, changing the line from the original to "From my toes right up to my hair." On the rest of the song, Dylan echoed each line he sang with a guitar line, almost like a blues singer, though this isn't exactly a blues song. And then came a killer rendition of "Tombstone Blues," with Charlie Sexton stepping out on lead guitar.

A better than the record version of "To Make You Feel My Love" came next, followed by band intros and a typically rocking "Leopard Skin Pill-Box Hat."

"Love Sick" as usual was the first encore featuring a tough guitar solo from Dylan and then "Like A Rolling Stone." And again with each line it became clear that this was one hell of a version, especially on the second verse with Dylan really leaning into "You say you never compromise with the mystery tramp but now you realize" and then after the chorus a woman walked on-stage and then another woman. And the first woman actually went up to the mike and sang off-key and out of time "How does it feel," and then the sound guys turned the mike down. And one of the roadies led away the second woman and there was another roadie crouched behind the drums ready to pounce into action, and this woman just stood there and Bob's standing there playing making those crazy faces that he makes and the band keeps playing and she doesn't leave and finally she's led out of the way but still stays on stage dancing to the crowd and finally Dylan sings the last verse and she's still up there pumping her arms and Dylan sings, "You're invisible now." looking right at her and then adds "Oh yeah" and everyone seemed to get it but her, but what might've been one of the most amazing recent versions of the song was ruined. The lights went down and the band left the stage.

They returned a few minutes later with Dylan wearing a cowboy hat and blasted out "Not Fade Away" uninterrupted.

A friend of mine had the best analogy. "You don't lean out from the stands and catch the ball during a no-hitter. You get ejected from the game and banned from ballparks. This was fan interference. You don't interfere with the show."

I can't put it any better than that. And so it seems to go with Bob Dylan and the Copa Room. But until that point, that late show was one hell of a show.

Newark, Delaware

And so what is apparently the last Bob Dylan concert of the 20th Century took place in the unlikely town of Newark, Delaware at the Bob Carpenter Center, a not so big concrete arena, where Dylan played in October '92. Asides from being home to the University of Delaware, Newark was once home to George Thorogood & The Destroyers who once did what they called the 50/50 tour playing all 50 states in 50 days, traveling to most of them in a Checker automobile, best known for manufacturing taxicabs.

This show was actually a make-up date for a concert canceled due to Dylan's 1998 Grammy appearance, and there were times when this show almost seemed to travel back in time.

The audience was extremely enthusiastic and after "I Am The Man Thomas," Dylan went into a slow beautiful "My Back Pages" with Larry on violin. I've seen him do this song a few times over the last decade, but tonight's version was easily one of the best if not the best. He sang it carefully, enunciating each word with great emotion.

An equally strong "It's Alright Ma" followed and this arrangement gets better every time I see it with Larry playing intricate guitar around Dylan's guitar punctuations while Charlie keeps the rhythm happening strumming a dobro. Dylan flubbed a couple of lines but it didn't matter.

"Tangled" did its usual job of rousing the audience, but the real surprise of the night was a previously unheard by Dylan country cover, "This World Can't Stand Long," which I'm pretty sure is a Roy Acuff song (though I may be wrong) and somewhere in the back of my mind a distant memory of Dolly Parton singing it is bouncing around. Whoever wrote it or did it, it was truly great and one of those special Dylan moments and particularly memorable for the last line of the chorus: "We should know it can't stand long because it's too full of hate." Larry and Charlie joined Bob on the choruses.

A gentle "One Too Many Mornings" preceded the switch to electrics with "Memphis Blues Again" with Larry on pedal steel starting the set, followed by an okay and sometimes slightly bluesy "Make You Feel My Love."

Dylan then brought on opening act Susan Tedeschi to jam with the band on "It Takes A Lot To Laugh." This was one of the real fun moments of the night. She is a very good and hot guitar player and she was just ecstatic to be invited on stage with Bob Dylan and Dylan was enjoying having her on-stage and absolutely getting off on her guitar playing. A true jam with Bob kind of as the encouraging overseer.

Next came "Joey," but the version was much different than the other two I've seen on this tour. Larry played guitar instead of pedal steel and it rocked hard, with a choppy rhythm that was much more reminiscent of versions of this song from earlier in the '90s.

An exquisite "Not Dark Yet" followed with featured an ethereal guitar break from Larry that earned him well-deserved applause. It was easily the high point of the electric set. Dylan again introduced Tedeschi and said, "We're gonna burn this one up," as Kemper kicked off the rhythm to "Highway 61," and burn it up they did. That road is going to need some repaving after this version. Dylan was having a lot of fun letting everyone take solos starting out with Larry on lapsteel followed by Tedeschi and then Dylan nodded to Charlie who exploded with a piercing flurry of blazing notes. His solo was over fast, but it was absolutely amazing and inspiring.

And then it was into a fairly typical set of encores, "Love Sick," "Rolling Stone," "Don't Think Twice," and "Blowin' In The Wind," followed by "Not Fade Away" with Tedeschi again appearing to sing on the choruses.

The lights went down and the crowd stayed put and they came back one more time for "Rainy Day Women."

Dylan didn't touch his harp the entire night.

So this final show of this remarkable tour wasn't as adventuresome setlist-wise as some of the others and perhaps didn't have those truly transcendent peaks. But the energy was there throughout and the songs were played and sung with

conviction. And in the end you can't ask for more than that. And once again, like every other show I've seen in the last two weeks, this one was completely different in every way. I can't think of any other performer that I've seen who can pull that little trick off.